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ABSTRACT

The role of the teacher in a positive school-community relationship is extremely important since it is the teacher who is the backbone of the educational system. Although school boards create school policy and administrators interpret these policies, teachers are the personnel who implement school policy. Teachers must also be prepared to make the most favorable impression possible in even the most innocent of circumstances in order to maintain public support. The community's perceptions of the teacher affect their perceptions of the school and subsequently student morale, school resources, and support for the school in general. (CB)

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The Role Of The Teacher In School-Community Relations

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by

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ED 287827

In analyzing the development of successful teacher/community relations it is first necessary to define what each means. A community is defined as a number of people having common ties or interests and living in the same place.[1] On the other hand, a teacher is defined as one whose occupation is to instruct.[2]

On the surface it would appear that these two definitions describe two completely different types of responsibilities. When we combine them, though, we get a definition which is very accurate in describing the relationship between the community and our schools and which will be used as the thesis of this writing. Teacher/community relations is the overlapping of the community's (parents and nonparents) and the teacher's resources so that each can work together as an effective team in order to accomplish that each child is educated to his or her full potential. It is making each aware of what the other has, and then having them work together for the betterment of the community through the efforts of the child. Without this "awareness" it is impossible for one to know what the other has to offer and so instead of one strong effort in educating the child, a weak inconsistent one occurs, with the child being the one that looses.

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[1] Thorndike-Barnhart Dictionary. Chicago: Doubleday and Co., 1971, p. 426.

[2] Webster's 9th New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1983, p. 869.

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There are basically two views of teacher/community relations: What a teacher does inside the classroom and what the teacher does outside the classroom.[3] This is a somewhat simple approach, but for our purposes extremely accurate. It can be said that no matter what a teacher does once identified as a teacher, he, and the entire district are being judged. The public is looking at him as an agent for the schools and, therefore, is judging both by the actions of one.

GET THE COMMUNITY INVOLVED

Many experts in education and public relations believe that the major problem with school/community relations is the public's lack of knowledge of the successes of education and the truly good things that happen in the classroom.[4] Effective school/community relations depend upon reaching into the community for support. Part of that "reaching out" is to manage the information flow from the school.[5] The classroom teacher is in an excellent position to effectively do this. Since home/school partnerships improve academic achievement, the teacher must strive to form some type of relationship with

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[3]Fried, Robby. Effective Schooling In A Rural Context: A New Hampshire View. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 243628. 1982, p. 4.

[4]Steller, Arthur W. How To Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 240678 April 1983, 1-13.

[5]Texas Education Agency. Case Studies In School Communication. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 242075. February 1984, 1-73.

the home.[6] Traditionally, since the schools have always been a "hands-off" area for the public, teachers must make the first move. Studies show that the general public does not know what is going on with teachers, but would like to.[7]

These studies show that the parent is willing to be supportive if only contacted and that the highest amount of support from the parent will be achieved by the teacher if it is the school who first contacts the parents.[8] The teacher must always be the one who initiates the contact from the parent, not the parent being the one to initiate the first meetings with the schools. Good schools welcome the parents and the community into them.[9]

Teachers are probably the best communicators of school relations to the community for several reasons. First of all, sheer quantity; teachers give thousands of impressions a year.[10] They are the ones that the children go home and tell their parents about during dinner conversation. If any question is more likely to be asked at the dinner table its, "what did you

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[6]Lareaur, Annette and Charles Benson. The Economics of Home/School Relationships. Phi Delta Kappan. October 1983, 401-404.

[7]Today's Education, Public Respects Teachers. November 1978, 11-12.

[8]Ibid., p. 12.

[9]Roberts, F. Talking With Your Child's Teacher. Parents. December 1983, p. 46.

[10]Steller, Arthur W. How to Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 240678 April 1983, 1-13.

do in school today?" Secondly, the teacher is usually the one the parent talks to in order to see how well their children are doing since it generally is only the teacher who knows for sure. It is natural to want to go to the source for something, and the source in most cases dealing with the student and the school is the teacher.

Many parents view the teacher as an extention of themselves when they are not there. When this happens it can turn out to be an ideal situation for the teacher and as a result, a very positive exchange of information and cooperation can occur. The teacher ends up being treated like almost part of the family.[11] This type of situation is ideal from a teacher/community relations point of view. What ends up happening is that certain members of the community, the parents, end up trying to influence each other on what a positive school system they have. This in turn gets more people interested in what is happening in the schools with them already having a good opinion of the schools before they actually see for themselves what is going on. before they have a chance to see the schools first-hand, they already have a favorable impression of the school.

One of the most important things to foster our sense of community is to relay the message that we are all in this together.[12]

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[11] Ibid., p. 8.

[12] Australian College of Education. The Community and Education. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 186996 1977, p. 78.

A feeling of complete teamwork is absolutely necessary if anything important is to be achieved. In many cases although parents and the community do want to become involved and help each other, buried in many parent/teacher, or even teacher/adult, relationships is a measure of unresolved fear and resentment dating back to the adult's school days.[13] This resentment must be overcome if any relationship is to occur because as long as there is any barrier at all, positive interaction will not happen.

TEACHERS CAN INFLUENCE COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Mrs. Elizabeth Koontz, a former president of the National Education Association once stated that school public relations involves classroom teachers. She believes that teachers should be expected to assist in doing whatever they can in order to further the school's reputation in the eyes of the community.[14] This statement is important for two reasons. First of all, it suggests to teachers that they are important and should not let the school's community reputation rest solely on the shoulders of the administrators. Secondly, it remeinds administrators that they have a large reserve of people ready to spread the "word" if only given the right reinforcement. Today, a school's administration simply cannot

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[13]Roberts, F. Talking With Your Child's Teacher. Parents. December 1983, p. 46.

[14]Steller, Arthur W. How To Improve Teacher-Parent Relationships. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 231075. February 1983, 1-9.

afford to overlook such a vast "army" that is capable of changing the public's view of how the schools are perceived.

TEACHERS SHOULD BE MADE AWARE OF THEIR ROLE

In keeping with the presumption that teachers are an extremely valuable school/community relations resource, it is the administrators responsibility to prepare and groom their teachers for the role they will be assuming in the community. Teachers should be made to understand in no uncertain terms of the importance they play in the community by their administration. As a general rule, teachers are the first thing a community sees when evaluating a school system and it is of paramount importance that what the community sees is positive.[15] Teachers play the largest and most critical role in producing public understanding of the school. They translate the goals of the school board and the school's administration into daily actions.[16] If something is wrong with the teachers, it probably will surface and become known to the community and if this happens to a school district, years of positive relations can be lost. Therefore, an effort has to be made to insure that all personnel know the importance of their roles in all situations which in even the remotest way might come to the attention of the public.[17]

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[15] Ibid., p. 8.

[16] Steller, Arthur W. How To Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 240678. April 1983, p. 12.

[17] Texas Education Agency. Case Studies In School Communication. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 242075. February 1984, p. 70.

EDUCATE THE COMMUNITY

Once the teachers are educated as to exactly what they should be doing, the next step for the administration should be to educate the community as to its obligation. Usually, it can be safely assumed that most, if not all of the community, is not going to take an active interest in the schools. Years upon years of being delicately and discretely pushed away from our schools by past teachers and administrators, as well as the public's own feeling of inadequacy and inferiority concerning education has forced these "outsiders" away. They regard the schools as almost a void in the community, something not to be touched. This situation has to be corrected immediately if any positive school/community relations are to be made. The nation can ill afford to let any potentially helpful group remain a silent partner in solving the national crisis in educational productivity.[18]

By making teachers more aware of their role as public relations people and then letting them "relate to the public", all concerned are in a winning situation.[19] The school gets a new resource they previously did not have and the parents and community get a voice in an area they previously did not have.

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[18] Walberg H.J. Families As Partners In Educational Productivity. Phi Delta Kappan. February 1984, p. 397.

[19] Steller, Arthur W. How To Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 240678 April 1983, p. 12

Educators must become aware of and responsive to the concept of accountability in education and the sooner more peolpe are brought in to distribute this burden, the easier it will be for all concerned.[20] Cooperative partnerships between the home, school, and community can dramatically raise educational productivity.[21] It has been proven many times over, and is almost common sense, that children do much better in a stable environment rather than an unstable one. Children need consistency. And, with all concerned working together this consistency can be maintained. Communication in any type of situation is always a necessity, and with dealing with children, and even with adults, associated with our school system, it is of the utmost importance.

The goal of every teacher/community contact should be that both parties communicate respect for each other and value the other's knowledge of the child.[22] This is an important thought and one worth some attention in any discussion of teacher/community relations. Too often teachers, and parents for that matter, think they know everything there is to know about a particular child. Knowing everything about any person is usually not possible, though, and each should remember that the other sees a side of the child that he does not sometimes

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[20]Riley, Bob E. Accountability In Education. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 214269. 1977, p. 30.

[21]Walberg H.J. Families As Partners In Educational Productivity. Phi Delta Kappen. February 1984, p. 398.

[22]Roberts, F. Talking With Your Child's Teacher. Parents. December 1983, p. 46.

see. For example, the teacher sees the child in an academic group situation among his peers, where the parent sees the child at home away from school in a more relaxed setting. Most people have several sides to their personality and children are no different. Therefore, the teacher and parent should respect each other, realizing that each has a lot of information they can give each other and work as a team with open lines of communication.

COMMUNITY HAS A VESTED INTEREST IN THE CHILD

The community, although for years having been shunned away from the schools, does have a vested interest in what is going on in them. Educational leaders now have been trying to make sure that they have addressed all the responsibilities of dealing with a student including the relationship with the parents. This is because the community gives up two of its most important assets to the schools; its children and the money to support the schools.[23] Teachers and administrators should recognize and respect parents rights and express concern about the education of their children.[24]

Strong financial support at the local level is the key to improved schools and that is one of the main reasons why it is important to have the best teacher/community relations

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[23]Steller, Arthur W. How To Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 240678. April 1983, p. 11.

[24]Burress, Lee and Jenkinson, Edward B. The Student's Right To Know. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 240594. 1982, 30-50.

possible.[25] If the community does not like what they are buying, they simply will stop paying for it. This is just good business. The schools therefore, has to provide what the public wants or else the money will stop. Parents, citizens, community groups, and school boards will be holding educators responsible for specific results in the schools of the future.[26]

The school district's goals and objectives should dictate the kind of graduate that walks across the stage in the spring of the year and these same goals should be a reflection of what the community wants. This cooperative endeaver between the student, community, and school will hopefully be the model of accountability in the future.[27] This means that the community should be in on some of the decisions affecting the schools. Certainly the citizens of the community should not make the decisions that they are not qualified to make by not having the appropriate training and/or academic degrees, but they should be able to express what they want in their schools since it is them paying for it in the first place. Since the teachers are out in the community, as well as seeing the community through the eyes of their students, they are in a unique situation to directly influence exactly what

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[25]Newman, J.W. and Mahan, H.F. This Alabama Study Reaches A New Audience: The Public. Phi Delta Kappan. March 1984, p. 501.

[26]Riley, Bob E. Accountability In Education. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 214269. 1977, p. 30.

[27]Ibid., p. 30.

the public thinks about their schools.

The people who view education in terms of simplistic answers need to understand better the realities of educating thousands of diverse and unique individuals.[28] Simply put, the education of today's children is not and cannot be an easy task, it is a complicated one. It would logically follow, then, that it would also be an expensive one. By bringing the people who "pay the bills" into the scheme of things it makes them more aware of what the school and the school district has to offer and will make the taxpayers more willing to pay for things since they will have a better idea of what is going on in the schools.

Leading management theorists have advocated participative management as a strategy for organizations to set goals.[29] This allows the community to become active, and thus, more supportive. The public assumes that teachers do not have a lot to say in the decisions affecting our schools.[30] The public does not, however, realize how much of an influence teachers have on them. Because of the fact that that the public does not view teachers as having any power, they usually do not view teachers as a threat. Given this, they do not

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[28]Kraft, J.D. Come Right In, John Q. Public. Today's Education. November 1978. p. 29.

[29]Rogers, Kathryn and Nord, Walter. The Effects of Collaborative Decisionmaking On Participants In A School District Facing Organizational Decline. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 203475. April 13, 1981, 30-35.

[30]Today's Education, Public Respects Teachers. November, 1978, 11-12.

have their defenses up with the teacher as they might with an administrator or school board member. as was stated earlier in this writing, a teacher is sometimes looked at as a member of the family because of their relationship with the children. The teacher, then, is closer to the parents and the community because the parents and the community choose to let that teacher in. This is precisely why the teacher can be so effective when dealing with the community. The community lets the teacher in.

Educational administrators who have looked at the issues of citizen participation in schools have written of participation as a strategy for creating good school-community relations.[31] Money has to come from the public and the public is beginning to question the educational system and its output.[32] This again goes back to who is paying the bills of the school district and how can they be influenced so that they are supportive of the schools.

Programs that target parent/teacher cooperation and focus on specific achievement goals show the greatest learning effects.[33] This is an important statement for several reasons. To start with, and probably the most important reason, the

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[31]Rogers, Kathryn and Nord, Walter. The Effects of Collaborative Decisionmaking On Participants In A School District Facing Organizational Decline. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 203475. April 13, 1981, 30-32.

[32]Riley, Bob E. Accountability In Education. Educational Resources Information Center, ED 214269. 1977, p.30.

[33]Walberg H.J. Families As Partners In Educational Productivity. Phi Delta Kappan. February, 1984, p. 398.

community is getting a greater return on their investment dollar when the parents, as well as other members of the community, decide to help and assist the teacher. Studies show that the child learns more. This makes the community happy because they feel that they are getting something for their money. Secondly, with the parents and the community helping they see the school from the inside, rather from the outside looking in.

By working together as a team, it is proposed that all parties; school children, and community win in the figurative sense. The school, through its teachers, gets the parents actively involved in it. The parents start to support the school. The children win because they are becoming better educated. And, finally, the community wins because they have a better educated, more productive person in which to hire. It is a win-win situation for all concerned. Theodore Shultz, in his book, Investing In People, summed it up the best when he said, "Investments in education yield economic returns for the nation and for individuals that compare favorably with investments in financial and physical capital".[34]

Throughout a teacher's career it is important to remember this almost "golden rule". There is no surer route to a person's

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[34]Shultz, Theodore W., Investing In People. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

heart -or resentment- than through his or her child.[35] This thought can also be spread to apply to the community as a whole. It is no secret that the people of a community are usually interested in each other and when one member of that community makes good, the rest of the community feels as though they've made good too. Therefore, a teacher must excercise discretion when dealing with a child or talking about that child because how that teacher and his school are perceived can depend on even the slightest word. If a situation is not handled as delicately as possible, people can and will become defensive. This is a situation that must be avoided if at all possible if the the school district's reputation is to be maintained.

CONCLUSION

The role of the teacher in a positive teacher/community relations setting is extremely important since it is the teacher who is the backbone of the educational system. Though school boards create school policy, and administrators who interpret it, it is the teachers who implement it. The teachers are the ones whom the community sees first, so, therefore, they must be prepared to make the most favorable impression possible in even the most innocent of circumstances in order to maintain public support. For when the public

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[35]Steller, Arthur W. How To Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships. Educational Resources Information Center, ED.240678. April 1983, 1-13.

support falls, so does the moral of the students, and the financial resources needed to keep the schools open and producing.

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17. Webster's 9th New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1983, p. 869.